

Women's Aid Refuge

'Crisis accommodation not a housing solution'

When a woman leaves an abusive relationship, she often has nowhere to go. This is particularly true of women with few resources. Lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for social housing mean that many women and their children are forced to choose between abuse at home or life on the streets.

What does this mean for women in Northern Ireland? Between the period 1 April 2016 - 31 March 2017 the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 29,166 incidents of domestic violence, 13,933 recorded domestic crimes and 3 murders. Women's Aid Refuges are frequently filled to capacity and must turn away women and their children. The relationship between domestic violence and homelessness is complex, as it's often underpinned by a range of factors such as gender inequality, socioeconomic disadvantage, mental ill health as well as poor access to income support and housing. Although domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships and can happen to men, the overwhelming number of victims are women (at the hands of a male partner/family member). For some women they come to refuge for safely as a dangerous perpetrator may know where else she may turn to for shelter.

Not all women who experience domestic violence will become homeless. Some have greater access to financial and social resources, such as income and housing. Women who have fewer of these resources are more likely to need help from Women's Aid refuges or other homelessness services, demonstrating how homelessness caused by domestic violence is also underpinned by other issues such as poverty. Many women experiencing domestic violence will have to get help from Women's Aid or homelessness services because they lack the financial resources needed to secure housing. For example, a controlling partner may have withheld his wife/partner's access to finances and/or not allow her to work outside the home, therefore limiting her ability to secure an income.

Sometimes a woman may not have a credit history or bad credit which makes it harder to rent, and in other cases women have to leave quickly and simply don't have time to prepare. Many women who experience domestic violence are not 'houseless' they have houses, but they can't be safe in them because the perpetrator lives there too. Women's Aid offer specialised support services and work with women and children who have experienced domestic and sexual violence or abuse. As well as our Outreach/Floating Support Service, Women's Aid provides crisis refuge accommodation where a woman, for her own safety or the safety of her children, must leave her home. This is a 24 hour service as domestic violence is not restricted to 9am to 5pm. Women's Aid staff can support and work with a woman to enhance self-esteem and confidence by exploring 'What is domestic abuse?' 'The cycle of violence' and 'What is a healthy relationship? We offer court support and work with our statutory, voluntary and community partners to help woman navigate housing services, legal services, medical or social welfare support. By empowering women they are better able to protect themselves and their children enabling them to sustain tenancies.

Women's Aid have child workers who support children and young people deal with their experience of domestic violence. Not all women who engage in Women's Aid services may take up to do a programme such as 'Journey to Freedom' however most do. Our one to one and group work with women can take up to fourteen sessions.

In Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid most women stay in refuge for 4-6 days, followed by 1-2 weeks as the next highest length of stay. However, we do have some women and children who are in our refuge for over six months. This is due to lack of available social housing or women being unable to access the private rental market. Women's Aid Refuge Services are for crisis accommodation, it is not a housing solution. We want to work with the Housing Executive to move women and their children out of refuge while maintaining appropriate support services. The Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022 aims to carry out a review of temporary accommodation and link this to the Supporting People Review. This is welcomed by Women's Aid. Our services need investment. Our Refuges have full occupancies, heavy turnover of women and children through the service. Women and children are accessing the service who have complex needs and we must have appropriate facilities and staff to support these vulnerable people. Investment in refuges has stagnated. If we are to future proof the service for women and children modernisation programmes are needed. While our outreach/floating support services continue to grow. Unfortunately we live in a society where crisis domestic violence accommodation is needed. I can't see this changing any time soon.

We must listen to women when they say they are fearful for their life. The consequences are too great not too.

Kelly Andrews

women's aid

Belfast and Lisburn